

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

March 6, 2016

“Pilate, Jesus and Barabbas”

“24 Hours That Changed the World” part 4

Mark 15:1-15

(Intro Video)

You are in the right place this morning. If you are feeling anything like me right now, it took an extra effort to come to worship today. That’s OK. Sometimes it takes three or four cups of coffee. Sometimes, you ask yourself, “Why am I doing this again?” Let me remind you. Because you honor God with your presence. You come to this place to draw strength from people who have decided to follow Jesus. This is a good place to be, not because anyone here is perfect, but precisely the opposite. None of us has it all together, and we need each other, and we need Jesus.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, and if you wish to receive something new from God today, stretch out your hands with your palms open, as a symbol of that desire. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, by whom all things were created, we need you this morning. We are your people, gathered in your name to praise you and worship you, and we need to hear your voice this morning. Allow me to step out of the way, so that your truth can be preached. Show us again how much you love us. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Have you ever been caught up in a large crowd before, possibly at some sporting games, a rally, or a show? Do you know that feeling when something happens, and you get lost in the moment? It could be cheering, booing,

whatever. You might say something, do something totally out of character, and when you get home, think, “Now, why did I do that?” Has that ever happened to you?

Crowds are very powerful. Ask any teen to tell you about peer pressure. I’ve felt it. And there are too many times in my own life when I know that I have just gone along with what was happening, that I ignored my inner voice and convictions, and I didn’t speak up. I remember at a fraternity party in college, I was very uncomfortable with the presence and use of alcohol. But everyone was having a good time, so why disrupt it, right? That evening, the campus security came in and shut the party down, because minors were being served. It was very embarrassing to all of us, including the non-drinkers such as myself. We were all without excuse.

There are times when we get caught up in the crowd. There are times when we just “go with the flow”. There are times we can convince ourselves that this must be the right thing to do. Most of the time when we are lost in the crowd, our reasoning abandons us. We compromise. We disobey God.

In the story of Jesus, Pilate, and Barabbas, we see that crowd in action. We see that those compromises weren’t the right thing to do at all. This story represents a choice we all have to make. Will we follow God’s plan, or the popular opinion?

It’s not that the crowd is always wrong. Remember on what we now call “Palm Sunday,” Jesus entered Jerusalem with the crowd cheering and waving palm branches. They were shouting, “Hosanna!” which means, “God save us.” The people were looking for a messiah. And they had found Jesus. But they were expecting someone to save them from Rome. See, the Romans were the bad

guys. The oppressors. The tax collectors. The military enforcers that were pushing down the country, not giving Israel their rights.

It was very popular to try to be “that guy” who delivered Israel from Rome. Adam Hamilton in his book, The 24 Hours that Changed the World” points out that from the day Jesus was born until the temple was destroyed in AD 70, there were between eight and thirteen people who tried to be Jewish Messiahs. All of them were violent people, and all of them were executed.

But Jesus came to be a different type of Savior. He came, not with military power, but with spiritual power. He would be a suffering servant that would save people from their sins. Not a very flashy platform to announce the beginning of a new kingdom, is it?

In the last few weeks, we covered the last hours of Jesus’ life, starting with the Last Supper, the prayer and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his mock trial in front of the Jewish priests. The Jewish authorities hated Jesus, but they decided not to kill him themselves. Rather, they chose to bring Jesus before the Romans, who could enforce a death sentence, if they could prove that Jesus was a traitor. So that brought him before Pilate, the ruthless Roman governor of Judea, at a place called the Antonia Fortress.

This video shows a model of what Jerusalem probably looked like in Jesus’ day. The temple dominates the city, and this part over to the side, attached to the temple, is the Antonia Fortress, where the Roman barracks were. Notice how close it was to the temple? This surely irritated the Jews, having this reminder of their occupation that close to the center of their worship. And I am sure it was intentional. The Romans weren’t going to let them forget their authority.

Try to visualize the scene in this passage. Shouting. Roman soldiers. Angry Jewish mobs. People looking for blood. The Jewish priests had them riled up pretty good. Now all they needed was Pilate to order Jesus' death.

They brought Jesus, bound hand and foot, to Pilate and claimed Jesus was trying to make himself king. Now, claiming to be king was a capital offense. Caesar was supposed to be king. This was a serious accusation that ended in death if found guilty. And Jesus stood silent before Pilate. Odd, isn't it? Why didn't he say a word? Pilate admitted he had the power to free Jesus. Pilate was amazed as Jesus' silence.

Jesus stood before this crowd and said nothing. He was humiliated, bloodied, and certainly didn't look or act like a king. In fact, his appearance sounds a lot like this text:

"He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account."

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:2-3&7)

This is from Isaiah 53:2-3 & 7. It was written hundreds of years before Jesus was ever born. And yet it sounds exactly like what was happening here. Jesus didn't defend himself because he was determined to carry out God's plan.

Jesus knew his death would save the world, though not in the way that the crowd wanted or expected.

Pilate saw through the Jewish leaders' plot. He knew they were only jealous. But Pilate was in a difficult position. He had to show force. He had to be a strict governor. History tells us, he was already on thin ice, and in AD 36, he was actually recalled to Rome for violations of his power. Now was not a good time to show weakness.

But Pilate thought he had an out. He had a custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover – a token to appease the masses. He thought he could free Jesus by offering the crowd a choice. So Pilate pulled out a murderer from prison: a man named Barabbas. He was a convicted criminal, one who had also fought for freedom from Rome. He was a killer, and it seems likely that given the choice, Pilate expected these people, some of whom had shouted “Hosanna” to Jesus Christ, would kill Barabbas instead and let Jesus Christ go free.

Not so. The crowd poured their hatred and disappointment into Jesus. They wanted his blood. Some of the people in the crowd were likely merchants whose tables Jesus turned over. It was probably a small crowd. The time was about six in the morning, right after sunrise, so maybe there were only a few dozen. They were not all Jews. Truthfully, there were others in Jerusalem who did not want Jesus to die. But they didn't speak up, or they weren't there. And yet, some of the people in the crowd were the same who called “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday. They had changed their minds.

Pilate gave in to their demands. The scripture says, he wished to “satisfy the crowd.” (Mark 15:15) What happens here is amazing. Jesus, the innocent lamb of son, is substituted for the convicted criminal, Barabbas. Barabbas knew

he was guilty. He admitted it. But Jesus took Barabbas' place. Jesus, an innocent man, took the punishment.

That's a pretty powerful truth. We all have been spared, like Barabbas, and Jesus died in our place. Whether or not we admit our own sin, the truth is, Jesus never sinned, not even once, and he died the death of a convicted criminal.

Honestly, I can understand the desire of the crowd. They wanted to be free of Roman oppression. Barabbas represented the choice of somebody who was actually fighting for them. Maybe we don't like his methods, but at least he was doing something. Jesus, on the other hand, was telling the people to love their enemies, to carry the backpacks of the Roman soldiers an extra mile, to turn the cheek when they were insulted and abused, to fight hatred with love. Jesus in effect said, "Not by the power of the sword, but by the power of the cross." Jesus would change the world by his sacrificial love.

Every one of those other would-be Messiahs died. But Jesus was resurrected. And you know what? Rome was eventually conquered by love. They gave up their Greco-Roman gods and followed a carpenter. Listen to this quote from Adam Hamilton:

"When Christians began to talk of a God who walked on this earth as a humble carpenter, who suffered and died for his people, and then, in final victory, was raised from the dead, they found the idea so captivating that they began to follow Jesus."

But on this day in Jerusalem, no one understood. No one chose to speak up for Christ.

Pretend you were in the crowd for a moment. Who would you pick? The one who would lead by force, throw out the Romans, reclaim your tax money,

wealth, and prosperity, and restore the strength of the Jewish kingdom? Or the one who would love your oppressors, serve them as they dwelt among you, double the service they demanded of you? Whom would you free? Whom would you destroy?

No wonder they chose Barabbas.

The force of the crowd is strong. The desire for immediate results, someone who will fight for us, is powerful. The truth is, we are the Pilates, wishing to appease the crowd at the expense of our own conscience, our own integrity. We are the crowd, wanting quick and easy answers, claiming that the ends justify the means. We are Barabbas, the ones who are guilty, who should have borne the punishment that Christ took upon himself.

But this message is not about making us feel guilty. Unlike the crowd, we know how the story ends. Jesus died to set us free. Isaiah 53:5 says it best,

“But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his wounds we are healed.”

One of the greatest reasons to gather together in church is to be in a crowd that wants the best for you. We draw strength when we worship together for at least one hour. Instead of being surrounded by a crowd bent against God’s will, we are surrounded by those who want to follow Jesus.

That’s why it is so beautiful to celebrate Holy Communion together. This is a tangible reminder that for every time we have gone along with the crowd, when we have forsaken Jesus and ignored what he stood for, we have forgiveness.

(Communion script follows, starting with a prayer of confession.)

Memory verse

Isaiah 53:7 - "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. When have I been a part of the crowd?
2. When have I refused to speak up for the innocent at my own risk?
3. When have I chosen "might" over "right"? Violence over peace?
Harshness over gentleness?
4. When have I failed to recognize the God's truth in my life?
5. In light of what Jesus went through, what am I willing to do about any of those answers?